

RELATIONS BETWEEN ENVIRONMENT AND CHARACTER.

In considering the question of the relationship between environment and character, we must admit at the outset the enormous force wielded by the former. But on the opposite side of the balance lies the will—a force mightier still where character is concerned—that force by which the pure gold of a noble character is smelted out in the furnace of life from those surrounding forces which we call environment. If we consider the lower forms of creation we find them all—in varying degrees—the creatures of their environment; but to man it is given in a supreme degree to make himself—in opposition to his environment, if need be.

Drummond says that our life is a continual adjusting of ourselves to our environment. And the all-important matter for us is *how* we so adjust ourselves. There must be a continuous relationship between us and the surrounding forces—physical, mental, moral, and spiritual. Each individual will can determine—or rather limit, to a certain extent—its environment; but much is beyond our control to alter, and then it becomes necessary for us to adjust ourselves to it. The way in which we do these two things will both determine—and in turn be determined by—our character.

The question of physical environment comes first, and is chiefly concerned with the preservation of life and health, for if we did not continually adjust ourselves to the physical forces around us, life would cease.

By reason and will man has largely raised himself above these forces, and subdued them to himself, but he is still dependent on a knowledge of, and obedience to, the laws which govern them, for life itself. If he does not obey these laws he must suffer the consequences in pain, disease, and death.

The first thing a little child has to learn is to adjust himself to this environment, and since mental and moral well-being depend to so great an extent upon physical health, the importance on character of the true adjustment of this relationship must be obvious; the child must learn that obedience and self-restraint are two of the first laws of existence. As he grows older this physical environment—accidents apart—should be of less importance, as subordinate more and more to his growing character—in other words, his power of will.

Coming now to the mental environment. This is partly determined by the people with whom circumstances of duty or necessity oblige us to live, but much more by a man's individual will. He can control his thoughts, and determine with whom he will live in mental communion. The minds of the greatest and best men of all ages are within his reach; and the thoughts in which a man allows himself, become in time a part of his being—they are his character. In the training of character we must see that the child has the opportunity of adjusting himself to a mental environment that is good and true; and where his will is feeble and his knowledge limited, help him and guide him, that he may admire and strive to imitate.

When we come to deal with moral environment the influences at work seem more subtle and more beyond our control. When a parent makes anxious enquiries as to the moral "tone" of a school, what is it but a recognition of the fact that the environment—the moral atmosphere pervading the school, has a subtle, undefined, and yet all-powerful influence on the character of a child? In this region of moral environment the individual man is of necessity more closely knit with his fellow-men, more dependent on the society in which he lives, and less able to control the surrounding forces, than in the lower physical and mental spheres. For this very reason—lest the forces at work should be adverse to the development of good in a man's character—it behoves us to see that the child starts in the battle of life with his will aided by the moral armour of good habits, founded on such principles of conduct as reason and faith acknowledge, and which shall guide him aright even against the subtle influences of moral evil. This great power

of habit is given us to aid our wills, and our habits are, of course, determined in the first instance by an act of volition.

But, as the dangers to character of a bad moral environment are great, equally great is the opposite power of good, moral surroundings. A man of sterling moral character is a factor of unknown and far-reaching good to the society in which he lives—the mere force of his life and character are more powerful than many sermons, while the man of flabby morals is the mere plaything of his environment.

Lastly, spiritual environment—the relationship of the soul with God, and of soul with soul. It is seldom that we are greatly influenced by the latter relationship. Only in the great crisis of our lives—individual or national—do we seem to become aware of the spiritual brotherhood of men. Alas! that this is so, that we see so often nothing but the husks—the outward seeming. But in the former relationship is found the fulfilment of our aims and the highest sanction for our morality. According to our relationship to the supreme Spirit of Goodness will be the measure of our power for good in the world. If that Spirit have free access to our souls, we shall be filled with a strength that is the very main-spring of our life and character. But here it might seem that the forces are so mysterious and so far beyond us, that the will could do little or nothing; and yet we are told that “if any man *will* . . . he shall *know* ;” and might one not say that volition is a condition of faith?

A man cut off from this spiritual environment may lead a beautiful moral life; but there is always a great void in his life—the highest needs of his nature can find no source of fulfilment, and for such a soul there seems no further evolution possible. If to be in continuous relationship with this spiritual environment is the very perfecting of character, and its source of strength, what can be done to help the child when the “shades of the prison-house begin to close”? Little, and yet much—but that largely negative help. Let us not step in where angels fear to tread, and close up the avenues between God and the soul with our blundering, well-meaning efforts. All that we can do is to see that the *means* of such communion are not wanting, and then leave to the great Educator of mankind the rest.

So far, the influence of the emotions and of temperament

on the relationship between environment and character seems to have been disregarded; but in so short an article it has been attempted rather to give the groundwork of the relationship, which must consist in the training of the will. The strong pillars of will must hold up the edifice, and then be crowned by the capitals of the emotions, for beautifying and softening. Without them life would be hard and self-sufficient—with them as chief rulers character would have no strength.

The question of temperament is a large one, but considered with regard to its influence in the modifying of the relationship between environment and character, it is rather one of degree than of kind. Certain temperaments are more susceptible to certain influences of environment than others, and each individual character must be framed in accordance with this knowledge.

It seems to me that the great aim in the training of character should be to make a man sympathise with and respond to all that is good and beautiful in his environment, while giving him, at the same time, the power of being as little dependent on it (that is, that part of it which is beyond his control) as possible, when it interferes with the physical, mental, moral, or spiritual well-being of either himself or his fellow-men. Of course, the *degree* in which each responds or sympathises varies according to temperament, inherited tendencies, or special aptitudes, and geniuses are a law to themselves; but that a man *do* respond to the good and beautiful, to whatever degree his nature is capable of, is the main point, and that he *can* rise above his environment, where the forces are opposed to good.

E. W.